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ABSTRACT

Relationships with grandchildren are a normative experience of middle and later adulthood, and a correlate of mental health. This study was conducted to explore associations between grandparents' views of their relationship with a grandchild and their reports of their own and their children's influence upon contact with the grandchild. Grandfathers (N=115) and grandmothers (N=186) recruited through church and civic organizations participated in a structured interview concerning their relationship with the oldest grandchild in the two-parent household geographically closest to them. Grandparents reporting that parents or the grandchild initiated most visits expressed greatest satisfaction with the relationships; grandparents reporting that all parties initiated visits about equally often expressed the lowest levels of responsibility to help the grandchild. Grandparents who reported that parents were present during most visits expressed the lowest levels of satisfaction with the relationships; grandparents who reported that they spent most visits with the grandchild alone expressed the higest levels of responbility for disciplining the grandchild, for offering childrearing advice to parents, and for helping the grandchild. It is suggested that parents' presence during grandparent-grandchild visits does not necessarily have a salutory effect upon the grandparent's view of the relationship. Rather, grandparent-grandchild contact without parents present may be a context for the development of particularly vital bonds. (Author/NB)

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Contact with Grandchildren and Views of Grandparent-Grandchild Bonds

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Abstract

This paper explores associations between grandparents' views of their relationship with a grandchild and their reports of their own and their children's influence upon contact with the grandchild. Grandparents reporting that parents or the grandchild initiated most visits expressed greatest satisfaction with the relationships, and grandparents reporting that all parties initiated visits about equally often expressed the lowest levels of responsibility to help the grandchild. Grandparents who reported that parents were present during most visits expressed the lowest levels of satisfaction with the relationships; grandparents who reported that they spent most visits with the grandchild alone expressed the highest levels of responsibilities for disciplining the grandchild, for offering childrearing advice to parents, and for helping the grandchild. It is suggested that parents' presence during grandparent-grandchild visits does not necessarily have a salutatory effect upon the grandparent's view of the relationship. Rather, grandparent-grandchild contact without parents present may be a context for the development of particularly vital bonds.

Contact with Grandchildren

and

Views of Grandparent-Grandchild Bonds

Relationships with grandchildren are a normative experience of middle and later adulthood, and a correlate of mental health. Although there is substantial evidence that parents influence the frequency of grandparent-grandchild interaction, less is known about parents' impact upon grandparents' reactions to these relationships. This paper explores associations between grandparents' views of their relationship with a grandchild and their reports of their own and their children's influence upon contact with the grandchild. It was hypothesized that grandparents reporting high levels of control over contact (through initiating visits and spending most visits with the grandchild alone) would express greater satisfaction and responsibility in the relationships than would grandparents reporting that parents initiated most visits and that parents were present during most visits.

Participants were 115 grandfathers and 186 grandmothers recruited through church and civic organizations. Ages ranged from 43 to 86; most described their health as excellent (32%) or good (52%). Most (81%) were married; only one member of married couples participated. The sample represented a wide range of occupations and former occupations, incomes, and educational backgrounds. Each participated in a structured interview concerning their relationship with the oldest grandchild in the two-parent household geographically closest to them. Grandchildren's ages ranged from 1 to 24 years (mean = 7.77); two-thirds of the grandparents lived within a 15 minute drive of the grandchild's home.

Interview topics included demographic background and perceptions of the relationship with the grandchild. Likert scales assessed perceptions including (1) satisfaction, (2) caretaking responsibility, (3) discipline responsibility, (4) helping responsibility, (5) responsibility for offering childrearing advice. These scales had been used in previous research and had acceptable internal

consistency levels. Grandparents also reported who initiated most visits with the grandchild, and whether most visits were spent with the grandchild alone, with the grandchild and parents, or with the grandchild alone and with the grandchild and parents about equally often.

ANOVA's compared mean scores on the relationship perceptions scales for grandparents reporting that they or their spouse initiated most visits (n=105), for grandparents reporting that parents or the grandchild initiated most visits (n=35), and for grandparents reporting that all parties initiated visits about equally often (n=148). Grandparents reporting that parents or the grandchild initiated most visits expressed greatest satisfaction with the relationships, and grandparents reporting that all parties initiated visits about equally often expressed the lowest levels of responsibility to help the grandchild, p's < .05 (see Table 1).

ANOVA's compared mean scores on the relationship perceptions scales for grandparents reporting that they spent most visits with the grandchild alone (n=99), grandparents reporting that parents were present during most visits with the grandchild (n=119), and grandparents reporting that they visited with the grandchild alone and with parents present about equally often (n=83). Grandparents who reported that parents were present during most visits expressed the lowest levels of satisfaction with the relationships; grandparents who reported that they spent most visits with the grandchild alone expressed the highest levels of responsibilities for disciplining the grandchild, for offering childrearing advice to parents, and for helping the grandchild, p's < .05 (see Table 2).

Hypotheses were partially supported. As expected, grandparents reporting that they spent some or most visits with the grandchild alone reported greater satisfaction and responsibility for disciplining, offering childrearing advice, and helping grandchildren than did grandparents reporting that parents were present during most visits. However, grandparents reporting that they or their spouse initiated most visits with the grandchild did not express greater satisfaction or responsibility than did other grandparents.

Although parents are undoubtedly important agents in facilitating grandparent-grandchild interaction, the findings suggest that parents' presence during grandparent-grandchild visits does not

necessarily have a salutatory effect upon the grandparent's view of the relationship. These grandparents most enjoyed relationships in which they have at least some opportunities to visit with the grandchild alone, and derived a greater sense of responsibility in these sorts of relationships. In this sense, grandparent-grandchild contact without parents present may be a context for the development of particularly vital bonds.

Future research should explore grandchildren's reactions to visits with grandparents with and without parents present, and identify grandparents for whom visits with a grandchild alone are difficult to accomplish (e.g., grandparents living at great distances from grandchildren, grandparents working full-time). Other questions for further exploration include similarities and differences in the value placed upon grandparent-grandchild contact across racial and ethnic groups and across social class.

Table 1

Perceptions of relationship by reports of visit initiation

	Who usually initiates visits with grandchildren:		
	Grandparent or Spouse	Parents or Grandchild	All about equally often
Satisfaction with Relationship	75.93 (10.86)	81.14 (11.98)	76.68 (9.58)
Responsibility for Discipline	64.99 (10.17)	66.11 (10.19)	64.65 (10.72)
Responsibility for Caretaking	9.70 (2.32)	10.40 (2.92)	10.01 (2.16)
Responsibility for offering childrearing advice	53.04 (9.39)	54.37 (8.40)	53.65 (9.22)
Responsibility for helping	21.32 (3.05)	21.69 (3.16)	20.43 (3.32)

Note: Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

Table 2

Perceptions of relationship by parents' presence during visits

	Parents' presence during most visits:		
	Parents usually present	Parents usually not present	Parents present/absent about equally often
Satisfaction with relationship	74.31 (11.01)	79.59 (10.17)	77.71 (10.14)
Responsibility for discipline	61.32 (10.87)	70.15 (8.69)	64.07 (9.89)
Responsibility for caretaking	9.94 (2.32)	10.39 (2.32)	9.57 (2.46)
Responsibility for offering childrearing advice	52.35 (9.24)	55.95 (8.75)	52.23 (9.73)
Responsibility for helping	20.55 (3.72)	21.58 (2.86)	20.55 (3.01)

Note: Standard deviations appear in parentheses.